

COMMERCIAL FISHERMEN OF BRISTOL BAY

March 28, 2012

Lisa Jackson, Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Ariel Rios Building
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20460

Dear Administrator Jackson,

As members of the U.S. commercial fishing and seafood industries, we know what happens when fisheries and watersheds are not cared for. We have watched the decline of too many fisheries due to loss of habitat, and we have seen that even billions of dollars cannot fully restore most of those fisheries following inappropriate development. All too often, attempts to reverse the damage are less effective and more expensive than prevention. Fishermen, and former fishermen, across the nation have experienced this. Until recently, such a fate seemed to await the salmon fishery of Bristol Bay, Alaska.

Therefore, we thank the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for starting a scientific assessment of the Bristol Bay, Alaska watershed. It is in places like Bristol Bay where our industry has the rare opportunity to maintain a resource and a fishery that is still healthy, and has the proven capacity to sustain thousands of fishing businesses -- from small family-owned operations to some of the largest seafood companies in the country. Let's protect this fishery, and do it right, while we still have the chance.

The EPA is not a traditional ally of our industry, but in this case, EPA acted with common sense and foresight. It is commendable when a government agency takes steps to thoroughly assess the vulnerabilities of a complex habitat before momentum builds for specific development plans.

As you know, Bristol Bay's commercial salmon fishery is among the most productive and valuable of the nation's fisheries. Any degradation to that fishery could be devastating for Bristol Bay fishermen and have a ripple effect throughout the country. We are united in our concern over the impacts to the fishery from large-scale developments such as the proposed Pebble Mine.

We support EPA's scientific review of Bristol Bay. And, while we thank you for initiating this review process, we also ask that this study be considered a first step. The EPA has the authority under the Clean Water Act to invoke Section 404(c), which could bestow on Bristol Bay the protection it needs from the type of large-scale developments that can devastate fisheries, either through catastrophic events or chronic habitat degradation over time.

The undersigned commercial fishing organizations and businesses urge EPA to complete a thorough science-based assessment of Bristol Bay; and, if supported by that assessment's results, apply its authority under Clean Water Act Section 404(c) to withdraw waters and wetlands in the headwaters of the Bristol Bay watershed from dredge and fill activity associated with large scale mining operations.

Sincerely,

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Mark Begich, U.S. Senator from Alaska